DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 787 PS 008 209

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Atkin, Charles K. |
| TITLE | The Effects of Television Advertising on Children. Report No. 5: Content Analysis of Children's Television Commercials. Final Report. |
| INSTITUTION | Michigan State Univ., East Lansing. Coll. of Communication Arts. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C. |
| REPORT NO | OCD-CB-346 |
| PUB DATE | Jun 75 |
| NOTE | 36p.; For other reports, see PS 008 205-208 and PS 008 380 |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 Plus Postage |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Children; *Comparative Analysis; *Content Analysis; Food; Games; Merchandise Information; *Television Commercials; *Television Research; Toys |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Television Advertising and Children Project |

ABSTRACT

This report, the fifth in a series of six reports on television advertising and children, describes the key content dimensions of network advertising messages presented on two comparable Saturday mornings in 1972 and 1973. A total of 470 advertisements was systematically and quantitatively analyzed along 28 variables involving the nature of character portrayals, presentation techniques, information provision, and persuasive strategies. More than half of the ads studied dealt with toys and games, while the remainder promoted food products such cereals, candies, drinks and desserts. Comparisons are made between the advertising in 1972 and 1973 and between toy and food commercials. (JMB)

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MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of
COMMUNICATION
College of Communication Arts

# EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN --

## CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

Charles Atkin

PS 008209

Report #5

TV ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN PROJECT

# THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN:

# CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

--FINAL REPORT --

June 1975

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Submitted to:

Office of Child Development
Department of Health,
Education and Welfare

Primary research assistants on this phase of the project included Steven West, Gary Heald and John Galloway.

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ABSTRACT

This research describes key content dimensions of network advertising messages presented on two comparable Saturday mornings in 1972 and 1973. A total of 470 advertisements were systematically and quantitatively analyzed along 28 variables involving the nature of character portrayals, presentation techniques, information provision, and persuasive strategies. More than half of the ads studied dealt with toys and games, while the remainder promoted food products such as cereals, candies, drinks and desserts. Comparisons are drawn between the two years and between toy and food commercials. These are some major findings:

(a) Characters: the typical ad portrays three or four characters, mostly children. Minority races are represented in one-fifth of the commercials, usually in large groupings of characters. Food ads have more characters, more adults, and more minorities than toy ads.

(b) Techniques: toy products are always illustrated in use, as are most foods. Toy ads are generally live-action, while most food ads have some animation. Special effects techniques are not frequently used, except for close-up photography in toy ads.

(c) Toy Information: Price is never mentioned and the substantive qualities of toys are seldom discussed. Appropriate age groups are not identified, although the degree of skill needed to play with the toy is communicated in one-third of the ads and one-fourth suggest that the demonstration may be difficult to duplicate. Disclosure of non-included accessories is made where appropriate, typically with a verbal qualification.

(d) Persuasion: Ads almost never use comparative message strategies or suggest that the child ask parents to buy the product. Many ads use jingles, and the typical ad repeats the brand name three or four times within a half-minute. Only a small proportion of children's commercials use testimonials or endorsements.

Among the more subjectively judged persuasion strategies, most ads employ some emotional appeals although toy ads tend to combine both emotional and rational appeals. Toy ads usually have a serious tone while food ads are more humorously presented. Food ads generally show the characters as highly satisfied with the product; toy ads display more moderate levels of satisfaction, but portray the product performance in a somewhat exaggerated fashion. The major type of message claim emphasizes the fun associated with the product, especially in food ads. Many ads portray an affiliative peer context, particularly for toy product use, but few promise gains in social status.

In advertising of food products, references to sweetness occur in one-fifth of the commercials and one-fourth specify the nutritional attributes in terms of number or type of vitamins. Premiums are featured in one-fourth of the food ads, typically constituting half of the message.

(e) 1972-1973 Changes: There were 13% fewer ads in the second year, with these major differences: more ads portrayed both white and minority characters; fewer ads used special effects techniques; not as many jingles were used; references to sweetness and nutrition declined.

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CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

This research study seeks to systematically and quantitatively describe the key content dimensions of advertising messages directed to children during Saturday morning television programming. To assess the nature of children's commercials, 28 specific variables are analysed for each advertisment within these four basic dimensions: portrayal of characters acting in commercials, mechanical techniques of presenting advertising stimuli, types of substantive product information provided in ads, and kinds of persuasive message strategies promoting the product.

The major goal is to produce a scientific record of the manifest attributes of conventional advertising content; no attempt is made to isolate idiosyncratic characteristics of commercials, to identify instances of code violations, or to make judgements regarding misleading claims. Although some subjective evaluations are necessary for classification of ads on a few variables, most variables involve straightforward objective categorization according to simple coding rules.

As a content analysis, this research is not intended to measure the impact of commercials on the perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors of children. It merely examines the qualitative characteristics of the stimuli that are encoded rather than the responses that might follow. Nevertheless, many of the content variables in this study have been selected because they are potentially influential factors affecting child audiences. Behavioral science researchers have identified many aspects of commercial messages that have effects on children, such as premium offers, racial characteristics of actors, slogans, product endorsements, and nutritional information.

The content analysis is limited to commercials presented during children's programs on Saturday morning, rather than studying all commercials that children

view in other time periods. Saturday morning is the primary time slot when child-oriented advertisments are shown on television; ads presented in other daytime periods when children view television are generally aimed at both children and adults, and evening prime-time commercials tend to be targeted primarily to adult audiences.

This study monitors the commercials aired on all three networks on two comparable Saturdays in 1972 and 1973. Since children's commercials are highly repetitive over time and the range of ads presented varies little from week to week, observation of a single Saturday each year is considered sufficient to adequately represent the types of advertising directed to children. Analysis of two different years allows for an assessment of time trend changes while providing replication with a different set of commercials.

The Saturdays were selected during the month of November, after the new television season is firmly established and when children are heavily exposed to weekend programming. The target days fall approximately six weeks before Christmas, when a large number of toy, game and doll commercials are featured. While this tends to overrepresent the incidence of toy advertising, it provides an opportunity to examine the characteristics of an extensive range of toy ads; one of the main objectives of this study is to describe the dimensions of toy advertising and to compare these commercials with food ads that dominate children's programs.

There have been two major content analyses of children's television advertising. Barcus (1971) monitored four Saturday mornings in the spring of 1971, analyzing 311 commercials from three networks and one independent station. The most frequently presented product categories were for cereals (23%), toys (23%), other foods and snacks (23%), and candies and sweets (21%). Most of the analyses were based on the set of different individual commercials rather

than the total number of presentations including repeated messages. Most ads were non-animated (58%), while smaller proportions were animated (22%) or mixed (20%). Most ads illustrated the product in use (62%), while many commercials showed pictures or drawings of the product (28%). Toy ads were all non-animated and mostly displayed the product in use; food ads tended to be non-animated or mixed.

Barcus also described the types of characters: children only (37%), adults only (19%), children and adults (26%), and non-humans (17%). Most of the commercials were portrayed only by white actors (63%); there were few commercials with only minority characters (2%), while some ads had both whites and minority persons (20%).

Few ads used endorsements by celebrities (3%). Premium offers occured infrequently (13%), mostly in cereal advertisments. Only one child-oriented ad mentioned the price of the product.

Winick, Williamson, Chuzmir, and Winick (1973) examined 236 selected commercials submitted by children's advertisers. They expressly excluded toy advertisments, so their study dealt primarily with food ads: snacks and desserts (22%), cereals (20%), candy (16%), drinks (16%), and other food and restaurants (15%). Ads were rated along 145 dimensions, using a four-point scale of emphasis. The data were not presented in a format amenable to precise interpretation, although some key findings emerged: animation was used in almost half of the ads, slogans were employed in three-fifths of the commercials, premium offers were featured in one-tenth of the commercials, the product was associated with fun in two-fifths of the cases, many food ads referred to sweetness but fewer discussed nutrition, and ads almost never suggested that the child ask the parent to buy the product; about two-thirds of the ads portrayed adult characters and two-thirds featured child characters, with minority group members appearing in one-fourth of the commercials.

## METHOD

Saturday morning advertisements were sampled from all three television networks on a pair of comparable days in 1972 and 1973. To insure the inclusion of a large number of toy commercials, the pre-Christmas Saturdays of November 11, 1972, and November 10, 1973 were selected for analysis. All nationally broadcast commercials on these days between 8 a.m. and 12 noon EST were studied; local ads and public service announcements were excluded from the analysis.

Ads from CBS, ABC and NBC were taped simultaneously on three videotape recorders which were switched on and off as the advertisements appeared. The commercials were subjected to systematic content analysis during the following months with frequent playbacks of each message.

Most commercials were 30 seconds in length; the occasional piggybacked pairs of 15-second ads by the same advertiser were combined and analysed as a 30-second advertisement. On the Saturday morning sampled in 1972, 252 ads appeared in the four-hour period. There were eight 60-second ads and twelve 15-second pairings; 92% of the ads were conventional 30-second spots.

During the corresponding Saturday morning one year later, 218 ads were shown, a 13% reduction in total number. Fully 96% were 30-second commercials, with four 60-second ads and four 15-second piggybacks.

In 1972, CBS and ABC filled the maximum advertising time with 12 minutes of network advertising per hour. CBS presented 95 ads and ABC showed 94, while NBC aired 63. In 1973, there were 79 ads on CBS, 70 on NBC and 69 on ABC. These figures were verified by examining logs supplied by Broadcast Advertisers Reports, Inc., an organization which monitors network television advertising.

The largest category of product advertised on each Saturday was for toys (including games and dolls), with 50% of all ads in 1972 and 66% in 1973. Foods

constitutad the other major category, with 48% of the ads in 1972 and 32% in 1973. Within the broad food category, cereals (especially sugared cereals) were shown most often, accounting for 27% of all ads in 1972 and 17% in 1973. Other edibles, such as candies, drinks, sweets, snacks, desserts and fast food restaurants, totaled 21% of the 1972 ads and 15% of the ads a year later. Apparently, the decline in the number of ads shown from 1972 to 1973 primarily reduced food advertising during this heavy toy-selling season.

The commercial messages were systematically content analyzed along several key dimensions: portrayal of characters, presentation techniques, product information, and message strategies. Within each dimension, a number of variables were delineated and categories were defined. Trained coders then observed each advertisement and assigned it into the appropriate category on all variables. Usually numerous replays were necessary to fully analyze each commercial along the various dimensions. Some variables are precisely quantifiable (i.e., number of characters, length of premium component of ad) while others require more subjective qualitative judgment (i.e., degree of exaggeration in appeal, emotionality of appeal). Obviously, the objective criteria produce the most accurate categorization while the judgmental assignments are more ambiguous. This report will present the full set of findings on all variables, but the most subjective aspects of the advertising content will be identified and treated cautiously. The definitions for each variable will be presented with the findings in the next section.

After each advertisement was assigned into a category on all variables, the data were tabulated across the full set of commercials separately for the years 1972 and 1973. Where a variable was appropriate only for one type of product, such as toys, the analysis was restricted to that product class. For

generally applicable content variables, the combined 1972-73 findings were compared between the basic toy and food product classes.

Each presentation of a commercial on the designated day was weighted equally. A version of an ad that was presented three times was counted three times in the analysis, while a single presentation was tabulated only once. Thus, all commercials were not considered as equals; those appearing more frequently were accorded more weight than those appearing infrequently. This decision was based on the assumption that repetition of a message will produce greater impact on the audience, so that the total set of stimuli reaching viewers along each dimension is a function of the number of messages rather than the range of different messages.

In most analyses, percentage distributions were employed as descriptive statistics. Since the advertisements did not constitute a random sample of ads for a given year but were instead a census of all ads from a particular Saturday, inferential statistics were not computed on these data. Nevertheless, major trends over time or large differences between the toy and food product categories can be observed and interpreted.

## FINDINGS

Tables 1 through 10 present the findings on each variable with percentages computed separately for 1972 vs. 1973, or for toys vs. foods. The results will be described in terms of absolute levels, time trends, and differences between product types.

Character dimension. Characters appearing in the commercials were described by age, race, and adult role. First, the total number of characters was tabulated, including animals, clowns, fantasy figures. In each year, there were slightly

less than 3 1/2 characters in each ad: the mean was 3.43 in 1972 and 3.46 in 1973. The typical advertisement featured two or three characters (Table 1). At the extremes, 7% of the 1972 commercials had just one character and 6% had seven or more characters. In 1973, more than twice as many commercials had either one character or seven or more characters. Food ads had more characters than toy ads, as 46% portrayed five or more characters compared to only 11% of the toy ads (Table 2). Three times as many toy ads as food ads had only one or two characters.

In ads portraying people, actors were categoried by age as children or adults. If the character appeared to be less than 18 years old, it was classified as a child; adults were considered as those 18 or over. Almost two-thirds of the ads had children only, and more than one-fourth had a mixture of children and adults (Table 1). Just 7% portrayed adults alone. The vast majority of toy ads portrayed children alone; three times as many toy ads as food ads showed children without adults (Table 2). The typical food advertisement showed both children and adults together.

Among the roles played by adults in these commercials, two basic categories were defined: parent (the father or mother of children in the commercial) and protagonist (humorous or dramatic hero or villan). Of all ads, 5% portrayed fathers, 4% portrayed mothers, and 2% portrayed both parents (Table 1). In about 4% of the ads the adults were heroes, in 4% they were villans, and in 2% both characterizations were presented. There were no major differences across the two years, but several aspects varied by product type: many more mothers were portrayed in food ads than toy ads, and all of the heroes and villans were presented in food commercials (Table 2).

The race of human characters was coded as white or non-white minority, based on manifest appearance. Minority persons were presented in about one-fifth of the

ads, almost always in combination with whites; just 2% of the ads in each year had only minority characters (Table 1). There was a slight trend toward portraying non-whites, with an increase from 18% to 24% between 1972 and 1973. Minorities were much more frequent in food ads; 31% of food ads vs. 13% of toy ads showed minority characters (Table 2). Ads featuring minority actors tended to have a greater number of total characters. While the ads featuring only whites had an average of 2.96 characters, there were an average of 5.12 characters in ads that included non-whites. This difference was slightly greater in 1973 (2.70 vs. 5.33) than in the previous year (3.15 vs. 4.91).

Technical production dimension. Three aspects of commercial production methods were examined. The first dealt with the display technique used to visualize the product. The vast majority of the ads visually illustrated the product in use at some point during the commercial (i.e., a child playing with a toy or consuming the food product); this active display of the product occurred in 81% of the commercials in 1972 and 94% of the 1973 ads (Table 3). A still picture or a drawing of the product was used in 16% of the 1972 commercials and 4% of the 1973 ads. Only rarely was the product not shown on the screen. Toys were more actively portrayed, as 99% of these ads illustrated the actual toy in use; on the other hand, one-fourth of the food ads showed only a picture or drawn representation of the food product (Table 4).

The technical mode of presentation distinguished between commercials using animation (i.e., cartoon or electronic representations) and those using live-action (i.e., real-life film or videotape portrayals). Almost three-fourths of all commercials relied only on live-action portrayals; the rest were split evenly between animated-only advertisements and ads combining the two techniques. There was a modest trend toward use of the live-action mode between the two years

studied (Table 3). None of the toy ads were animated, while three-fifths of the food ads employed at least some animation (Table 4).

The third aspect involved visual special effects techniques used in producing the commercial. The categories included multiple camera angles (i.e., side-angle or sweeping-angle shots of the product), close-up photography (i.e., product appears larger-than-life due to lack of context or domination of visual field), off-speed action (i.e., slow motion or accelerated motion, compared to natural rate of action), and visual tricks (i.e., electronic disappearance or transformation of character). While these classifications were somewhat subjective, the raters were not applying value judgments regarding the misleading or unrealistic nature of the techniques; they merely sought to describe the technical procedures apparent in the commercials.

The major special effects technique was the close-up, which was judged to exist in two-fifths of the ads each year (Table 3). More than half of the toy ads used close-up photography, compared to one-fifth of the food ads (Table 4). Multiple angles occurred infrequently, and none were found in the second year. There was no slow motion, and only a few instances of accelerated action in food ads (i.e., Alpha Bits). Ads relying on visual tricks were also rare (i.e., Jiffy Pop). Finally, 3% of the 1972 ads and 26% in 1973 had no special visual techniques; toy ads were less likely than food ads to use such techniques.

Provision of product information. In the analysis of toy commercials, the presentation of substantive information about the product was delineated. Special attention was devoted to those informational aspects involving disclaimers or qualifications regarding usage of the product. One key element of consumer information was the price of the product; not one toy commercial in either year reported on cost (Table 5). A second type of information concerned the hard

qualities of the product (i.e., materials and durability). While this was not a reliably measured factor, provision of such information was uncommon; 11% of the toy ads discussed the substance of product attributes (Table 6).

Few ads mentioned the appropriate age range for enjoyment of the advertised toy, even in general terms (i.e., not recommended for children under six years old, for five to eight year olds, or for pre-schoolers). While many of these toys and games are labeled according to target age groups on the package in the store, only 1% of all toy ads provided this information (Table 6). Many more ads did mention that certain skills were needed to play with the toy; this happened in 25% of the ads in 1972 and increased to 38% of the 1973 ads (Table 5). More than one-fourth of the ads suggested that it was difficult for the child to duplicate the toy demonstration in the commercial, with more of these references in 1972 than 1973 (Table 5). Of course, in many of these ads the toy was sufficiently simple or general in appeal that limitations in usage were not necessary.

One specific area of disclosure involved disclaimers for toy accessories (i.e., batteries not included, doll clothes sold separately). For half of the toys, no qualifiers were needed because of the self-sufficient nature of the product. In 3% of the 1973 ads, it was judged that a disclosure should have been presented but was not (Table 5). Among the qualification techniques, verbal statements were used somewhat more often than visual disclaimers, and in some cases both channels of communication were employed (Table 6). There was a tendency for the 1972 disclaimers to be verbal only, while the 1973 ads had more audio and visual statements.

Message strategy dimension. There are a number of persuasive appeals and stylistic modes that can be employed in children's advertising. This analysis assessed eleven basic message factors that might influence child viewers.

The first variable was the explicit suggestion that the child ask parents to purchase the product (i.e., "tell mom to get this cereal"). This occurred in only 2% of the 1972 ads and was not apparent in any ads a year later (Table 7). Another rare event was the comparative message strategy, where a product is explicitly compared with a competing brand along one or more attributes (i.e., "Food X has more vitamins than food Y"). Only two ads in 1972 made such comparisons (Table 7).

The use of slogans or jingles to sell the product was also measured. A jingle was a musical theme, typically using a catchy song and lyrics to feature the brand name, which was generally employed across several versions of a commercial over time. A slogan was a verbalized phrase characterizing the brand in non-musical terms. More than two-fifths of the ads used such devices in each year, with the musical jingles dominating (Table 7). There was a slight tendency for food advertising to feature such techniques (Table 8). Several toy ads in the second year used both a slogan and jingle to communicate the theme. A closely related variable was repetition: the number of times the brand name was verbalized during the commercial. Just a handful of ads relied on only a single mention of the name; typically it was stated two, three, or four times (Table 7). Almost one-fourth of the ads used five or more mentions of the brand name. There were no important differences from one year to the next; toy ads featured slightly more repetition than food ads, with an average of 3.82 vs. 3.53 mentions (Table 8).

One of the most subjective areas for judging was the nature of appeal. Two elementary categories were derived: rational (straightforward factual description of substantive product attributes) and emotional (emphasis on unverifiable benefits or non-physical attributes, such as psychological rewards). The coders

found few ads that were judged to be purely factual-rational; there was a clear trend for the 1973 ads to combine rational and emotional appeals (Table 7). In 1972, 55% of the ads were rated emotional compared to only 31% a year later; the proportion of appeals combining rational and emotional elements increased from 39% to 68% between 1972 and 1973. The food ads used the emotional-only appeal two-thirds of the time, while the toy ads tended to use the combinational approach (Table 8).

The general tone of message was classified as serious (i.e., informational, dramatic, or romantic, but not intended to be funny), or humorous (jocular, frivolous). More than two-fifths of the ads were basically serious and more than one-fourth were generally humorous, while the remainder had both serious and humorous aspects. THere was a trend toward a more serious tone, as the number of purely funny messages decreased from 32% in 1972 to 18% in 1973 (Table 7). Toy ads were mostly serious, while food ads were predominantly humorous; 98% of the toy commercials had some serious elements, and 92% of the food commercials featured some humor (Table 8).

The extent to which the characters displayed satisfaction with the advertised product was rated along a scale from low satisfaction (no explicit enjoyment or benefit experienced on screen) to high satisfaction (verbal or nonverbal display of strong liking for product). Almost three-fifths of the commercials were judged in the highest satisfaction category; such expressions were much more common in food than toy commercials (Table 8). A closely allied factor was the degree of exaggeration in product performance, ranging from none (normal operation of product displayed in nondramatized fashion) to much exaggeration (extravagent verbal claims or visual demonstration beyond that which a average child is likely to achieve). This evaluation was mostly applicable to

toy products, where there was a greater opportunity to overplay the benefits of the toy. A high degree of exaggeration was seldom reported, but evidence of moderate levels of exaggeration were noted in 41% of the 1972 ads and 59% of the ads in 1973 (Table 7). Exaggeration occurred mostly in toy advertising, as 79% of these ads had some kind of exaggeration (Table 8).

Among the types of message claims that were presented in the advertisements, three categories were examined: feelings of fun (enjoyable to eat or drink, or fun to play with), power (control over object) and being grown-up (acting out teen-age or adult role). The feeling of fun was the predominant claim in these advertisements both years, with about two-thirds classified in this category (Table 7). The feeling of power was cited second most often in both years, followed by the grown-up feeling. Food ads were almost exclusively based on the fun claim, while toy ads frequently emphasized feelings of power and being grown-up (Table 8).

Peer appeals were present in many commercials. These were classed as affiliative (product associated with social gathering, as in group play with toy or eating food with friends) or status-oriented (increase in interpersonal attention, prestige or popularity from use of product). Affiliative appeals were noted in more than half of the ads, with 44% in 1972 and 64% in 1973 (Table 7). An increase in status derived from the product was portrayed in 4% of the 1972 ads and 8% of the 1973 ads. The remainder either had no children or peers appearing in the ads, or made no peer-related appeal. Toy ads showed the product leading to affiliation more than twice as often as food ads (Table 8).

Finally, the use of testimonials or celebrity endorsements of personal benefits derived from the product was coded. This technique was used in 3% of the 1972 ads and 8% of the 1973 ads (Table 7). Both food and toy commercials relied on testimonials or endorsements to a limited extent (Table 8).

Three specific message strategies are applicable only to edibles, and these factors were analyzed separately only for the food ads. References to sweetness (i.e., tastes sugary or sweet) appeared in one-fifth of the food ads; the rate decreased from 29% in 1972 to 6% in 1973 (Table 9). Claims of nutritional value were also assessed, in terms of general nourishment (i.e., the product is good for you), mention of the number of vitamins (i.e., product contains eight essential vitamins), and listing of specific vitamins (i.e., product has Vitamins A and C). Overall, 7% of the food ads listed one or more vitamins and 19% presented the number of vitamins contained in the food (Table 10). These specific mentions occurred with equal frequency in the two years studied; general nourishment claims decreased from 15% in 1972 to 3% in 1973 (Table 9).

The offer of a premium (toy or other reward contained in the product package or obtainable by mail) accompanying the purchase of the product occurred in one-fourth of the food ads. The rate was 22% in 1972 and 27% one year later (Table 9). Most of the premium offers constituted half of the running time of the advertisement, typically 15 seconds of a 30-second commercial. In 1972, 6% of the food ads had premium offers filling one-quarter or less of the ad, 7% had one-third of the commercial devoted to the premium, and 9% used half of the time for presenting the premium (Table 9). The premium portion of the ad increased in 1973, with 26% of the commercials devoting half of the time to the premium.

## DISCUSSION

Based on this empirical evidence, a general portrait of children's television commercials can be drawn: the typical advertisment is populated with between three and four characters, with most of the ads featuring children. Minority races are represented in one-fifth of the commercials, usually in larger groupings of characters. Food ads have more characters, more adults, and more minorities than toy ads.

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Toy products are always illustrated in use, as are most food products. The toy ads are generally live-action, while most food commercials have at least some animation. Special effects techniques are primarily restricted to close-up photography, primarily in toy ads.

In toy ads, the price is never mentioned and the substantive qualitative attributes of the toys are seldom discussed. Appropriate age groups are not identified, although the degree of skill needed for play with the toy is mentioned in one-third of the ads and one-fourth suggest that the demonstration may be difficult for the child to duplicate. Disclosure of non-included accessories are used where appropriate, typically with a verbal qualification.

In advertising for food products, references to sweetnesses occur in one-fifth of the commercials; one-fourth specifically discuss nutritional attributes in terms of numbers or types of vitamins. Premiums are featured in one-fourth of the food ads, typically comprizing half of overall message.

Advertisments almost never use comparative message strategies or suggest that the child ask the parents to purchase the product. Many ads use jingles, and there is frequent repetition of the brand name -- averaging three-and-one-half times per ad. Only a small proportion of children's commercials use testimonials or endorsements of the product.

There are several aspects of commercials that involve rather subjective judgements on the part of the coders. The description of these message variables is offered much more tentatively. According to the coders' interpretation, most ads employ emotional appeals, especially for food products; toy ads combine emotional and rational appeals. Toy ads tend to have a serious tone, while food ads are more humorously presented. Food advertisments generally show the characters as highly satisfied with the product; toy ads display more moderate levels of satisfaction. Portrayal of product performance is somewhat

exaggerated in most toy commercials. The major type of message claim emphasizes the fun associated with the product, especially in food advertising. While many ads portray an affiliative peer context of product usage, particularly in toy ads, there are few cases where gains in social status are promised.

A comparison of the attributes of ads aired in 1972 vs. 1973 yields some indication of change trends over time. First, there were 13% fewer commercials presented in the second year of the study, due to the increased restrictions in non-program time that took effect between the two measurement periods.

The proportion of toy advertising increased substantially and food advertising showed a corresponding drop from 1972 to 1973. The differential composition of the set of specimen commercials from one year to the next must be taken into account when drawing comparisons on the various content dimensions that are related to product type. Controlling for this factor, there are a number of important differences that appear between the two years studied: slightly more characters were featured in the second year, and a somewhat greater proportion of the ads portrayed both white and minority characters. There was a tendency for fewer ads to use special visual techniques such as product close-ups in 1973.

Many more toy ads mentioned the degree of skill needed to use the product in the second year, although there were fewer suggestions of the difficulty involved in replicating the televised demonstration; slightly fewer toy ads relied solely on a verbal statement for product accessory disclaimers.

Not as many jingles were used in 1973 as in 1972. More of the ads displayed high levels of product performance satisfaction by the actors in the second year. There were slight increases in associating the product with peer affiliation and in emphasizing the feeling of fun provided by the product. Overt references to sweetness in food ads declined sharply, and there was also a substantial drop in nutritional claims. Slightly more premium offers were displayed for a much greater length of time in 1973.

Of course, two points in time allow for only the most tentative inferences regarding trends, and the single-year period between measurements limits the amount of change that might be anticipated. It would be much more advantageous to have multiple re-assessments over longer time intervals. Perhaps a repeat of this content analysis every three or four years would be the optimum design for assessing changes over time. Although the present data do not offer a solid basis for observing trends, the replication of the 1972 study in 1973 does increase the generalizability of the overall set of findings.

Several other limitations of this study are related to the specific research objectives. Since the pre-Christmas period was purposely chosen to maximize the data base for the category of toy commercials, the representativeness of the overall set of commercials deviates from the annual norm. Conclusions about those message attributes associated with toy ads will not be applicable to the kinds of commercials aired in February or June. However, the findings are presented separately for toys and foods, and they can be combined using appropriate weighting criteria for generalization to different times of the year.

The goals of the study are also restricted in terms of the universe of commercials examined. The Saturday morning commercials are the most controversial type of advertising seen by young viewers, and these ads constitute the vast majority of commercial messages specifically directed to child audiences. Nevertheless, only a small proportion of children's overall advertising exposure occurs on Saturday mornings, since they spend much more time viewing on weekdays and during early evenings. An accurate assessment of the total range of advertising stimuli reaching children must also include messages presented in these periods, so future research might profitably widen the focus to include adult-oriented ads. Analysis of these other advertisments would also provide valuable

comparisons between the attributes of ads directed to children vs. those aimed at the genral public. Certainly a number of interesting differences are likely to emerge from such a comparison.

Finally, it must again be emphasized that not all content attributes of these commercials involved clearcut objective classification. While highly reliable and valid measures can be devised to determine types of characters or use of premium offers in ads, judgments as to message rationality or tone are more debatable, and other investigators might make differing interpretations. Descriptions of the more subjective categories should be treated cautiously by the reader. While the value of such judgmental findings may be doubtful as an absolute assessment of the nature of children's commercials, relative comparisons from one year to the next or between food and toy products are still useful.

In sum, this content analysis has identified a number of distinctive characteristics of advertising presented during children's Saturday morning programming. While implications of these content dimensions for children's knowledge acquisition, attitude development or behavioral patterns can not be inferred from this type of analysis, the findings provide a guide to the kinds of effects that might be expected from exposure to these stimuli. Hopefully, behavioral science researchers will continue to explore the impact of Saturday morning commercials to ascertain how they affect child viewers.

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## REFERENCES

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Table 1

DISPLAY OF CHARACTERS IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

| Character dimension: | 1972 (252 ads) | 1973 (218 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **Number of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| One | 7% | 15% |
| Two | 30 | 28 |
| Three | 22 | 15 |
| Four | 17 | 16 |
| Five | 10 | 7 |
| Six | 8 | 4 |
| Seven or more | 6 | 15 |
| **Age of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| Children only | 60% | 66% |
| Adults only | 9 | 3 |
| Children and adults | 29 | 26 |
| No human characters | 2 | 5 |
| **Role of adults portrayed in ad --** | | |
| Father | 3% | 7% |
| Mother | 6 | 2 |
| Both parents | 2 | 2 |
| Hero | 4 | 3 |
| Villan | 5 | 2 |
| Both hero and villan | 2 | 2 |
| Other role | 16 | 11 |
| No adults | 62 | 71 |
| **Race of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| White only | 80% | 71% |
| Minority only | 2 | 2 |
| White and minority | 16 | 22 |
| No human characters | 2 | 5 |

Table 2

DISPLAY OF CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S TOY AND FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Character dimension: | Toy ads (270 ads) | Food ads (193 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **Number of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| One | 14% | 4% |
| Two | 41 | 14 |
| Three | 20 | 17 |
| Four | 14 | 19 |
| Five | 7 | 11 |
| Six | 0 | 16 |
| Seven or more | 4 | 19 |
| **Age of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| Children only | 87% | 28% |
| Adults only | 1 | 14 |
| Children and adults | 12 | 49 |
| No human characters | 0 | 9 |
| **Role of adults portrayed in ad --** | | |
| Father | 4% | 6% |
| Mother | 1 | 10 |
| Both parents | 1 | 4 |
| Hero | 0 | 7 |
| Villan | 0 | 8 |
| Both hero and villan | 0 | 4 |
| Other role | 7 | 24 |
| No adults | 87 | 37 |
| **Race of characters portrayed in ad --** | | |
| White only | 87% | 61% |
| Minority only | 1 | 3 |
| White and minority | 12 | 28 |
| No human characters | 0 | 8 |

Table 3

PRESENTATION TECHNIQUES IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

| Technical dimension: | 1972 (252 ads) | 1973 (218 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **Product display technique used in advertisement --** | | |
| Actual product shown | 81% | 94% |
| Pictures or drawings | 16 | 4 |
| Other/Product not shown | 3 | 2 |
| **Mode of presentation used in advertisement --** | | |
| Animated cartoon | 12% | 11% |
| Live-action film | 67 | 81 |
| Both animated cartoon and live-action film | 21 | 8 |
| **Special visual techniques used in advertisement --** | | |
| Multiple camera angles | 4% | 0% |
| Close-ups | 40 | 40 |
| Accelerated action | 2 | 0 |
| Slow motion | 0 | 0 |
| Transformations | 1 | 0 |
| Combination of above | 32 | 18 |
| Other | 18 | 16 |
| None | 3 | 26 |

Table 4

PRESENTATION TECHNIQUES IN CHILDREN'S TOY AND FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Technical-mechanical dimension: | Toy ads (270 ads) | Food ads (193 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **Product display technique used in advertisement --** | | |
| Actual product shown | 99% | 73% |
| Pictures or drawings | 1 | 24 |
| Other/Product not shown | 0 | 3 |
| **Mode of presentation used in advertisement --** | | |
| Animated cartoon | 0% | 27% |
| Live-action film | 99 | 38 |
| Both animated cartoon and live-action film | 1 | 35 |
| **Special visual techniques used in advertisement --** | | |
| Multiple camera angles | 2% | 4% |
| Close-ups | 56 | 19 |
| Accelerated action | 0 | 3 |
| Slow motion | 0 | 0 |
| Transformations | 0 | 1 |
| Combination of above | 22 | 30 |
| Other | 2 | 36 |
| None | 18 | 7 |

Table 5

PRODUCT INFORMATION PROVIDED IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S TOY COMMERCIALS

| Information dimension: | 1972 (125 ads) | 1973 (145 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| Costs of Toy in ad -- | | |
| No mention of price | 100% | 100% |
| Mention of price | 0 | 0 |
| Hard qualities of Toy in ad -- | | |
| No mention of hard qualities | 90% | 88% |
| Mention of hard qualities | 10 | 12 |
| Appropriate age range for Toy in ad-- | | |
| No mention of appropriate age | 98% | 100% |
| Mention of appropriate age | 2 | 0 |
| Skill needed to use Toy in ad -- | | |
| No mention of skill needed | 75% | 62% |
| Mention of skill needed | 25 | 38 |
| Suggestion of difficulty for child to duplicate Toy demonstration -- | | |
| No suggestion of difficulty | 68% | 79% |
| Does suggest difficulty | 32 | 21 |
| Qualifiers about accessories needed for Toy in ad -- | | |
| No qualifiers and none needed | 49% | 52% |
| No qualifiers but were needed | 0 | 3 |
| Visual statement of qualification | 12 | 15 |
| Verbal statement of qualification | 24 | 16 |
| Both visual and verbal statement | 8 | 14 |
| Other | 7 | 0 |

Table 6

PRODUCT INFORMATION PROVIDED IN CHILDREN'S TOY COMMERCIALS

| Information dimension: | Toy ads (270 ads) |
|---|---|
| **Costs of Toy in ad --** | |
| No mention of price | 100% |
| Mention of price | 0 |
| **Hard qualities of Toy in ad --** | |
| No mention of hard qualities | 89% |
| Mention of hard qualities | 11 |
| **Appropriate age range for Toy in ad --** | |
| No mention of appropriate age | 99% |
| Mention of appropriate age | 1 |
| **Skill needed to use Toy in ad --** | |
| No mention of skill needed | 68% |
| Mention of skill needed | 32 |
| **Suggestion of difficulty for child to duplicate Toy demonstration --** | |
| No suggestion of difficulty | 73% |
| Does suggest difficulty | 27 |
| Does not apply | 0 |
| **Qualifiers about accessories needed for Toy in ad --** | |
| No qualifiers and none needed | 50% |
| No qualifiers but were needed | 2 |
| Visual statement of qualification | 14 |
| Verbal statement of qualification | 20 |
| Both visual and verbal statement | 11 |
| Other | 3 |

Table 7

MESSAGE STRATEGIES IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

| Message strategy dimension: | | 1972 (252 ads) | 1973 (218 ads) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Proposes that child ask parents to buy product -- | | | |
| | Proposal is not made | 98% | 100% |
| | Proposal is made | 2 | 0 |
| Draws comparisons with other products -- | | | |
| | No comparisons made | 99% | 100% |
| | Makes comparisons | 1 | 0 |
| Uses slogans or jingles -- | | | |
| | No slogans or jingles | 56% | 57% |
| | Contains jingles | 44 | 33 |
| | Contains slogans | 0 | 8 |
| | Both slogans and jingles | 0 | 2 |
| Mentions brand name -- | | | |
| | One time | 2% | 3% |
| | Two times | 23 | 19 |
| | Three times | 25 | 38 |
| | Four times | 24 | 18 |
| | Five times | 12 | 12 |
| | Six times | 3 | 5 |
| | Seven times | 2 | 1 |
| | Eight times or more | 8 | 4 |
| Nature of message appeal -- | | | |
| | Rational | 6% | 1% |
| | Emotional | 55 | 31 |
| | Both rational and emotional | 39 | 68 |

Table 7 (continued)

MESSAGE STRATEGIES IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

| Message strategies dimension: | 1972 (252 ads) | 1973 (218 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **General tone of message --** | | |
| Serious | 39% | 50% |
| Humorous | 32 | 18 |
| Both serious and humorous | 29 | 32 |
| **Degree of performance satisfaction of model --** | | |
| Low satisfaction | 1% | 6% |
| Medium satisfaction | 44 | 32 |
| High satisfaction | 55 | 62 |
| **Degree of exaggeration of product performance --** | | |
| No exaggeration | 58% | 40% |
| Some exaggeration | 41 | 59 |
| Much exaggeration | 1 | 1 |
| **Type of message claim --** | | |
| Fun to eat or play with | 64% | 65% |
| Provides feeling of power | 20 | 16 |
| Provides feeling of being grown-up | 12 | 15 |
| Other | 4 | 4 |
| **Nature of peer appeal --** | | |
| No peer appeal | 52% | 28% |
| Product increases status | 4 | 8 |
| Product involves affiliation | 44 | 64 |
| **Use of testimonial or endorsement --** | | |
| None | 94% | 96% |
| Testimonial/Endorsement | 6 | 4 |

Table 8

MESSAGE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN CHILDREN'S TOY AND FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Message strategy dimension: | Toy ads (270 ads) | Food ads (193 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| Proposes that child ask parents to buy product -- | | |
| Proposal is not made | 99% | 98% |
| Proposal is made | 1 | 2 |
| Draws comparisons with other products -- | | |
| No comparisons made | 100% | 99% |
| Makes comparisons | 0 | 1 |
| Uses slogans or jingles -- | | |
| No slogans or jingles | 61% | 52% |
| Contains jingles | 35 | 42 |
| Contains slogans | 2 | 6 |
| Both slogans and jingles | 2 | 0 |
| Mentions brand name -- | | |
| One time | 1% | 4% |
| Two times | 17 | 27 |
| Three times | 35 | 26 |
| Four times | 21 | 22 |
| Five times | 13 | 11 |
| Six times | 5 | 2 |
| Seven times | 1 | 2 |
| Eight times or more | 7 | 6 |
| Nature of message appeal -- | | |
| Rational | 4% | 3% |
| Emotional | 27 | 68 |
| Both rational and emotional | 69 | 29 |

Table 8 (continued)

MESSAGE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN CHILDREN'S TOY AND FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Message strategies dimension: | | Toy ads (270 ads) | Food ads (193 ads) |
|---|---|---|---|
| General tone of message -- | | | |
| | Serious | 71% | 8% |
| | Humorous | 2 | 57 |
| | Both serious and humorous | 27 | 35 |
| Degree of performance satisfaction of model -- | | | |
| | Low satisfaction | 4% | 2% |
| | Medium satisfaction | 52 | 21 |
| | High satisfaction | 44 | 77 |
| Degree of exaggeration of product performance -- | | | |
| | No exaggeration | 21% | 89% |
| | Some exaggeration | 79 | 9 |
| | Much exaggeration | 0 | 2 |
| Type of message claim -- | | | |
| | Fun to eat or play with | 43% | 94% |
| | Provides feeling of power | 30 | 2 |
| | Provides feeling or being grown-up | 22 | 1 |
| | Other | 5 | 3 |
| Nature of peer appeal -- | | | |
| | No peer appeal | 22% | 66% |
| | Product increases status | 8 | 4 |
| | Product involves affiliation | 70 | 30 |
| Use of testimonial or endorsement -- | | | |
| | None | 97% | 92% |
| | Testimonial/Endorsement | 3 | 8 |

Table 9

MESSAGE STRATEGIES IN 1972 AND 1973 CHILDREN'S FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Message strategies dimension: | 1972 (123 ads) | 1973 ( 70 ads) |
|---|---|---|
| **Mentions sweetness of food in ad --** | | |
| No mention of sweetness | 71% | 94% |
| Mentions sweetness | 29 | 6 |
| **Claims nutritional value of food in ad --** | | |
| No claim | 58% | 73% |
| Refers to general nourishment | 15 | 3 |
| Mentions number of vitamins | 20 | 18 |
| Lists specific vitamins | 7 | 6 |
| **Discusses premium offer accompaning food in ad --** | | |
| No premium offer | 78% | 73% |
| Offers premium | 22 | 27 |
| **Duration of discussion of premiums in ad --** | | |
| Zero percent of ad | 78% | 71% |
| Five percent of ad | 2 | 0 |
| Ten percent of ad | 3 | 0 |
| Twenty-five percent | 1 | 0 |
| Thirty-three percent | 7 | 3 |
| Fifty percent of ad | 9 | 26 |

Table 10

MESSAGE STRATEGIES IN CHILDREN'S FOOD COMMERCIALS

| Message strategies dimension: | Food ads (193 ads) |
|---|---|
| **Mentions sweetness of food in ad --** | |
| No mention of sweetness | 79% |
| Mentions sweetness | 21 |
| **Claims nutritional value of food in ad --** | |
| No claim | 63% |
| Refers to general nourishment | 11 |
| Mentions number of vitamins | 19 |
| Lists specific viatmins | 7 |
| **Discusses premium offer accompanying food in ad --** | |
| No premium offer | 76% |
| Offers premium | 24 |
| **Duration of discussion of premiums in ad --** | |
| Zero percent of ad | 76% |
| Five percent of ad | 1 |
| Ten percent of ad | 1 |
| Twenty-five percent | 1 |
| Thirty-three percent | 6 |
| Fifty percent of ad | 15 |